

GALENA CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

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SUPERINTENDENT'S
OFFICE

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Local Boundary Commission

November, 17, 2003

Commissioner Roger Sampson
Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
801 Tenth Street, Suite 200
Juneau, Alaska 99801-1894

Dear Commissioner,

I present the following in response to your request regarding consolidation views.

It seems that the consolidation and potential closure of small schools comes to issue all across this great land, in all states. Under-funded schools law-suites, mandated consolidation, local control, basic educational services, student testing profiles, resulting student transportation needs, cultural differences, quality of school staff, existing and potential facilities, school and community leadership, employee benefit packages, employee housing, existing travel costs, fiscal impact (taxation/impact aid/grant funding/collective bargaining agreements), available technology, and of course student enrollment patterns. Having served through school consolidation in the Rudyard and Hingham School Districts that became the Blue Sky School District in Montana I can attest first hand to many benefits, challenges and angry feelings that can evolve from locally voted consolidation and can only imagine the unrest that comes from man-dated combinations. Diminishing student count invited several school consolidations in Montana. Economy of numbers of course provided some savings but increased travel costs often off-set those. As smaller communities lost student numbers to a point of closure, citizens generally blame school consolidation for the loss of their community being.

I don't believe there's magic in the number 250. Communities can certainly operate quality schools with economic efficiency at smaller student counts. The choice of course is in the kinds of service expectations which are generally driven by the resources present. The Galena IDEA program offers excellent services at less than half the cost of average schooling in Alaska for thirty-seven hundred students. Their state test scores much higher than average. The available resources will drive the program options and we would hope quality. The state's position should be one that quickly presents service options proven valid but within the cost range of per student amounts in the 250 student

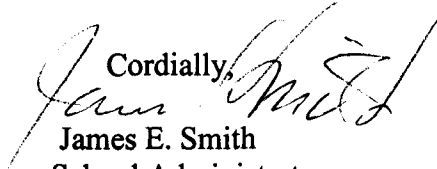
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count districts. So who decides what number are too few students? Because there is really no such number, school administrators and trustees must examine all the things noted above and those noted in Senator Wilken's communication. The individual community need, location, facilities, resources, student performance, child-count and culture should all be a part decisions regarding the future of our children. Are parents qualified to make those decisions? I say within the limits of available resources. A great many Alaska parents are making those decisions now either working with the educational services available in the area, moving, or relocating their children in schools with more extended programs. The technology is currently available to present sound instruction and learning, undoubtedly we'll be in conflict with "No Child Left Behind". There's nothing about a student count that dictates consolidation or closure but rather child welfare and academic performance.

In closing, I feel that the dollars spent on further studies or litigation, and we've seen plenty of both around the country, would be far better spent on analyzing student services toward higher performance in low performing districts. Economy of scale would probably direct us a state-wide school district like that employed in Hawaii and of course they have just as many or more problems as our local control model. Will we want to consolidate Fairbanks and Anchorage?

Cordially,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "James E. Smith", written over the typed name.

James E. Smith
School Administrator
Galena City School District

Cc: Darroll Hargraves